

Writing Introductions

Adapted from UNC's Writing Center and *The Craft of Research*

What is an introduction?

Introductions (and conclusions) can be the most difficult parts of papers to write. Usually when you sit down to respond to an assignment, you have at least some sense of what you want to say in the body of your paper due to your research and thinking. But these middle parts of the paper can't just come out of thin air; they need to be introduced and concluded in a way that makes sense to your reader.

Your introduction acts as bridge that transports your readers from their own lives into the "place" of your analysis. If your readers pick up your paper about education in the autobiography of Frederick Douglass, for example, they need a transition to help them leave behind the world of Jamaica Plain, television, e-mail, and Ula and to help them temporarily enter the world of nineteenth-century American slavery. By providing an introduction that helps your readers make a transition between their own world and the issues you will be writing about, you give your readers the tools they need to get into your topic and care about what you are writing.

Let's take a look at the following introductions:

Why can't a machine be more like a man? In almost every episode of Star Trek: The Next Generation, the android Data wonders what makes a person a person. In the original Star Trek, similar questions were raised by the half-Vulcan Mr. Spock, whose status as a person was called into question by his machinelike logic and lack of emotion. In fact, Data and Spock are only the most recent "quasi-persons" who have explored the nature of humanity. The same question has been raised by and about creatures ranging from Frankenstein to Terminator II. But the real question is why characters who struggle to be persons are always white and male. As cultural interpreters, do they tacitly reinforce destructive stereotypes of what it is about a person that we must think of as "normal"? The model person, to which we all must aspire, seems in fact to be defined by Western criteria that exclude most of the people in the world.

As part of its program of Continuous Quality Improvement ("CQI"), Motodyne Computers plans to redesign the user interface for its Unidyne™ online help system. The specifications for the interface call for self-explanatory icons that will allow users to identify their function without an identifying label. Motodyne has three years' experience with its current icon set, but it has no data showing which icons are self-explanatory. Lacking such data, we cannot determine which icons to retain and which to re-design. This report provides data for eleven icons, showing that five of them are not self-explanatory.

In today's society, would Major John Andre', a British spy captured behind American lines in civilian clothes in 1780, be hanged? Though considered a noble patriot, he suffered the punishment mandated by military law. Over time, our traditions have changed, but the punishment for spying has not. It is the only offense for which death is mandated. Recently, though, the Supreme Court has rejected mandatory death sentences in civilian cases, creating an ambiguity in their application to military cases. If Court decisions apply to the military, then Congress may have to revise the Universal Code of Military Justice. This article concludes that to be the case.

These are all very different introductions, but the underlying structure of them is the same: (1) contextualizing background, (2) statement of the problem, and (3) response to the problem. **Go back over each of those introductions and try to mark the three pieces of structure. Discuss your answer with a partner.**

Crafting an introduction

1. Establishing context:

One sunny morning, Little Red Riding Hood was skipping happily through the forest on her way to Grandmother's house, when suddenly Hungry Wolf jumped out from behind a tree, frightening her very much.

Like the opening to most fairy tales, this one establishes a stable, unproblematic, even happy context:

STABLE CONTEXT: One sunny morning, Little Red Riding Hood was skipping happily through the forest on her way to Grandmother's house *stable context* [imagine butterflies dancing around her head to flutes and violins].

DISRUPTING PROBLEM: . . . When suddenly Hungry Wolf jumped out from behind a tree *condition* [imagine trombones, tubas, and bass fiddles], **frightening her** [and, if they lose them- selves in the story, little children as well]. *cost*

The rest of the story develops that problem and then resolves it. Unlikely though it may seem, introductions to most research reports follow the same strategy. They open with the stable context of a common ground – some apparently unproblematic account of research, a statement of the community's consensus on a familiar topic. The writer then disrupts it with a problem: *Reader, you think you know something, but your knowledge is flawed or incomplete.*

2. Stating your Problem

Once you establish common ground, you can disrupt it with a problem. A problem should include

- some *condition* of incomplete knowledge or understanding, and
- the *consequences* of not fully knowing or understanding.

You can state the condition directly:

Motodyne has no data showing which icons are self-explanatory.

Or you can imply it in an indirect question:

The real question is why these characters are always white and male.

You then must complete the problem by answering the question *So, what?* ie include a cost and/or benefit to solving the problem:

Lacking such data, we cannot determine which icons to redesign.

Or

With such data, we can determine which icons to keep and which to redesign.

3. Stating your response

Once you disrupt your readers' stable context with a problem, they will expect you to resolve. They look for that response in the last few sentences of your introduction. It is your thesis statement; your argument that answers the proposed problem.

Some final words on the subject

All this may seem formulaic, but when you master a rhetorical pattern, you gain a tool for thinking. By forcing yourself to work through a full statement of your problem, you have to explore what your audience knows, what they don't, and, in particular, what they should. Remember:

Common Ground + Problem + Response

Like all structural summaries, this one feels mechanical. But when you flesh this pattern out in a real paper, readers lose sight of the form and notice only the substance. In fact, the expected form helps them find the substance they are looking for. That form also encourages you to think harder than you might have before.

Tips on Writing Introductions

Many writers find the first few sentences of an introduction the most difficult to write. A few things that you might have been told in past, but should **avoid** are:

- Don't start by citing a dictionary entry: "Webster's defines ethics as . . ." If a word is important enough to define in a report, it is too complex for a dictionary definition.
- Don't start grandly: "The most profound philosophers have for centuries wrestled with the important question of . . ." If your subject is grand, it will speak its own importance.
- Don't repeat the language of your assignment or the context of your assignment from class. This dulls the importance of the topic you are writing on and makes it seem like it has no real-world relevance.

If you are struggling quite a bit, consider some of the following as ways to start your introduction:

- Open with a striking quotation, but make sure its language is like the language in the rest of your introduction
"From the sheer sensuous beauty of a genuine Jan van Eyck there emanates a strange fascination not unlike that which we experience when permitting ourselves to be hypnotized by precious stones."
Edwin Panofsky, who had a way with words, suggests here something magical in Jan van Eyck's works. His images hold a fascination . . .
- Open with a striking fact
Those who think that tax cuts for the rich stimulate the economy should contemplate the fact that the top 1 percent of Americans own as much wealth as everyone in the bottom 40 percent.
- Open with a relevant anecdote, but again, do this only if its language or content connects to your topic and if it vividly illustrates an aspect of your problem.
This year Tawnya Jones begins junior high in Doughton, Georgia. Though her classmates are mostly African American like her- self, her school system is considered legally racially integrated. But except for a few poor whites and Hispanic students, Tawnya's school still resembles the segregated and economically depressed one that her mother entered in 1962. . . .

When you open with any of these devices, be sure to use language that leads to your context, your problem, and a focused statement of its solution.